GYPSY JAZZ

in search of DJANGO REINHARDT and the SOUL of GYPSY SWING

MICHAEL DREGNI

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CONTENTS

GYPSY JAZZ FAMILY TREE

THIS BY NO MEANS PURPORTS TO BE a complete list of Gypsy jazz musicians. It's simply a sort of dramatis personæ, an aid to tracing the history of the music. The generations are loosely formed at best, based on when musicians were or are making their strongest statements. I have added musicians' dates of birth and death when known.

Founding Generation 1920s–1950s

Jean "Poulette" Castro
Mattéo Garcia
Auguste "Gusti" Malha
Vétese Guérino (accordionist)
Jean "Django" Reinhardt (1910–1953)
Stéphane Grappelli (violinist) (1908–1997)
Joseph "Nin-Nin" Reinhardt (1912–1982)
Jean-Joseph (aka Pierre) "Baro" Ferret (1908–1976)
Étienne "Sarane" Ferret (1912–1970)
Jean (aka Pierre) "Matelo" Ferret (1918–1989)
Charles-Allain (aka René and Auguste) "Challain" Ferret (1914–1996)
Eugène Vées (1915–1977)
Louis "Vivian" Villerstein (violinist)
Henri Crolla (1920–1960)
Marcel Bianchi (1911–1997)
Joseph Sollero
Joseph Gustave "Tatave" Viseur (accordionist)

Georges "Jo" Privat (accordionist)
Jacques "Montagne" Mailhes (?–1942)
Léo Slab (née Slabiak) (violinist)
Antonio "Tony" Muréna (accordionist)
René "Didi" Duprat
Jacques "Piton" Reinhardt
Henri "Piotto" Limberger (violinist)
Alfred "Latcheben" Grünholz
Eddie "Bamboula" Ferret

Second Generation 1950s–1970s

Jacques "Montagne" Mala (1926–?)
Schnuckenack Reinhardt (violinist) (1921–2006)
Savé Schumacher-Racine
Étienne "Patotte" Bousquet (1925–1998)
Gérard Cardi
Paul "Tchan Tchou" Vidal (1923–1999)
Henri "Lousson" Baumgartner-Reinhardt (1929–1992)
Paul Pata
Maurice "Gros Chien" Ferret (1928–1999)
Joseph "Babagne" Pouville
René "Néné" Mailhes (1935–)
Laro Sollero (1937–2002)
Jean-Jacques "Babik" Reinhardt (1944–2001)
Christian Escoudé (1947–)
Jacquet Mailhes
Jean "Cérani" Mailhes
Chatou Garcia
Mondine Garcia (1926–)
Spatzo Adel
Jozef "Wasso" Grünholz
Francis-Alfred Moerman (1937–)

Third Generation 1970s–1990s

Fapy Lafertin (1950–)
Koen De Cauter (1950–)
Hans'Che Weiss
Louis Faÿs
Titi Winterstein (violinist)
Lulu Reinhardt

Michel "Sarane" Ferret (1948–)
Jean-Jacques "Boulou" Ferré (1951–)
Élié "Élios" Ferré (1956–)
Paul "Challain" Ferret
Jeannot "Titote" Malla
Coco Reinhardt
Samson Reinhardt
Marcel Loeffler (accordionist)
Tchavolo Schmitt (1954–)
Mandino Reinhardt (1955–)
Dorado Schmitt (1957–)
Titi Bamberger
Mito Loeffler
Martin Weiss (violinist)
Zipflo Reinhardt (violinist)
Mike Reinhardt
Didier Roussin (1949–1996)
Dominique Cravic
Patrick Saussois (1954–)

Fourth Generation 1990s–Today

Raphaël Faÿs (1959–)
Biréli Lagrène (1966–)
Isaak "Stochelo" Rosenberg (1968–)
Jacques "Ninine" Garcia (1956–)
Angelo Debarre (1962–)
Rodolphe Raffalli (1959–)
Patrick "Romane" Leguidecoq (1959–)
Moréno Winterstein (1963–)
Macho Winterstein
Stéphane "Tchocolo" Winterstein
Serge Krief (1962–)
Christophe Lartilleux
Florin Nicolescu (violinist)
Lollo Meier
Paulus Shäfer
Jean-Yves Dubanton
Jean-Claude Laudet (accordionist)
Jean-Philippe Watremez (1961–)
Jimmy Rosenberg (1980–)

Sammy Daussat (1972–)
Pierre "Kamlo" Barré
Samson Schmitt (1979–)
Ritary Gaguenetti (1978–)
Joscho Stephan (1979–)
Titi Demeter
Yorgui Loeffler
Dino Mehrstein
Eddy Waeldo
Wawau Adler
Frédéric Belinsky (1974–)
Noé Reinhardt (1979–)
Steeve Laffont
Christian "Syntax" Windrestein
Dallas Baumgartner (1981–)
David Reinhardt (1986–)
Richard Manetti (1986–)
Rocky "Falone" Gresset
Mundine Garcia
Rocky Garcia
Simba Baumgartner
Lévis Adel (1997–)

People say we Gypsies are robbers and thieves—and I agree. We steal everyone's music, and make it Gypsy music!

—Danny Fender, 2007

Music is essential. It's a history, it's a tradition. Music is like a voyage. It's our past, our present, our future, our destiny. We might not have written texts of our history, but it's all in the music. C'est une patromonie.

—Syntax, 2007

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GYPSY JAZZ

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PROLOGUE

Music in the Shadows

The Imperfect History of Gypsy Jazz

MIDNIGHT, PIGALLE. The red-light district of Paris glows in a nocturnal carnival of neon and incandescent color. It spreads out from place Blanche along rue Fontaine and boulevard de Clichy, the lights a lure to the infamous nightspots down through history—*bals musette* to brothels, Russian cabarets to jazz joints, La Grand Guignol to *centime* peep shows. Pigalle is where Django Reinhardt played his music, known today as Gypsy jazz. From the early 1930s, when the then-unnamed Quintette du Hot Club de France gathered for some of its first jam sessions at the brasserie L'Alsace à Montmartre to Django's own louche nightclub La Roulotte of the World War II years, Pigalle was his base. Then as now, when the clock here strikes twelve, the night has only begun. Drag queens tuck themselves into sequined gowns for the evening's song and dance at Madame Arthur; oystermen shuck shells at Charlot on place de Clichy; B-girls and prostitutes await under halos of red light; the streets and sidewalks are an everlasting parade of hucksters, shell-game artists, bums, lovers, and wandering strangers. And above it all, the neon-lit windmill of the Moulin Rouge never stops turning.

I'm descending La Butte de Montmartre, drawn from the charm of place du Tertre to the glorified grime of Pigalle. Once a rebellious bohemian *ville* on the edge of Paris, Montmartre is now alternately *trop* chic in its penthouse apartments and too quaint in its cute bistros with plastered-on atmosphere. Yet at a typical tourist café atop La Butte, Au Clarion des Chasseurs, today's generation of Gypsies are still playing Django's jazz. The music is good—guitarist Ninine

Garcia, accompanied by Jeannot "Titote" Malla of the venerable Malha clan. But the *bière blanche* is too expensive and too watery. I've come now to Pigalle in search of more music and a late-night *steak au poivre*.

As I drift through the crowd around place de Clichy, I spy the sign. For some reason, it catches my eye down an adjoining street—surprising, as the main *place* is a kaleidoscope of light, whereas this side street stretches away into nothing but darkness. Just a hundred paces into the shadows sits a lone wooden sandwich board on the edge of the sidewalk. No spotlights, no ballyhoo. Just paint on wood, brushed on in the curlicued hyperbole of a lost era: "Cirque Tsigane." An arrow points off down an even murkier, even smaller alley.

There's no reason to follow that arrow. All of the thrills of the modern world are alive around place de Clichy—and who knows what waits down the alley. Still, something in the promise of a Gypsy circus at midnight allures.

I turn off the *place* and walk up the street under the boulevard trees. Away from the hubbub of Pigalle, the world is suddenly silent: You can hear the midnight wind through the branches, and it's dark—too dark. I imagine the metallic click of a switchblade opening in a doorway, my imagination primed from reading too many Simenon *série noire* tales.

Halting in front of the sign, I follow the arrow's direction and look with distrust up the street. Passage Lathuille appears to be one of those French village *rues* transported into the midst of Paris. I've found them in most every arrondissement, forgotten and overlooked. They're cobbled with all the elegance of a drunkard's stumble between buildings lurching and leaning overhead as if they're holding each other upright. Yet there's a light at the end of this passage.

I almost tiptoe up the cobbles, not wanting to disturb the night—or let anyone know I'm approaching. I reach an elbow in the street, and suddenly there's nothing there. The buildings end in a crumble of walls and spilled bricks, a gapped-tooth space in the urban grimace. Where a large corner building once stood there is just a hole in the city. The surrounding edifices reveal their embarrassed backsides, blank walls with neither paint nor windows, all surrounded by a jumbled silhouette of those far-sung Parisian rooftops crowned with chimneys and insectlike television antennae.

Within this hole in the city are parked six Gypsy caravans and their modern-day horses—road-weary, low-riding automobiles. The caravans are not the glorious old wooden *verdines*, as they were affectionately known in Romanès. These are contemporary camper trailers lacking any romance and called simply *campines*. They're all metal and plastic, assembly-line prodigies, yet tired and dusty as well from many miles of travel.

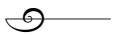
In the center of this Gypsy encampment stands the tent of the Cirque Tsigane. Far from the grand multicolored, multistoried tents of a three-ring circus, this

tent is some twenty meters across, made of green, or gray, or black canvas—the night, and time, hides its true colors. The tent is held aloft by wooden poles. A wire of flickering yellow lightbulbs is strung across the facade like a string of pearls dressing up the drabness. The lights sway in the wind to an unheard melody.

I stand as if in an enchantment. Here is a world of wonders hidden within the heart of one of the great modern capitals.

Gypsies throughout the world long survived and thrived as showmen and women. They were known for their trained bears dancing for flea-market crowds, feats of legerdemain in cup-and-ball games, magic shows, circus acts. Others carried movie projectors and a caravan stocked with old, taped-together films that they screened for a few *centimes* in the open-air night on a suitable blank wall in country towns. And Django's parents themselves traveled Europe with the tailgate of their *verdine* converted into a small stage on which his father played music while his mother danced for spare coins in village squares and for market-day *fêtes*. Whether it was making music for eleventh-century Persian princes or Django playing jazz for modern-day kings and queens, many of the Romani became a caste of entertainers. And passage Lathuille is a passage into that world.

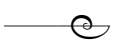
Sadly, the show here is over for the night. The string of light bulbs still glows feebly, but the tent is dark, lit only by starshine. There are just a few last lights on in the *campines*, the sound of accordions and guitars and the ringmaster's shill being recharged for tomorrow.



I hoped to return the next night to see the circus in its glory but instead am forced to catch an airplane and leave Paris behind.

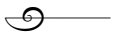
Back in the city six months later, I hurry to passage Lathuille as soon as evening comes. I have money at the ready for a seat under the Cirque Tsigane tent. But turning up avenue de Clichy on this autumn night, I can't seem to find the alleyway. I remembered it being just paces away, and now I wonder if it was off a different street radiating from place de Clichy. Perhaps my sense of direction was skewed. Or maybe I was dreaming it all.

When I finally find passage Lathuille, it doesn't seem nearly as mysterious or dangerous. There's no sign for a Cirque Tsigane, and I have a sad premonition of what I will find. The street now just looks empty and gray. The hole in the city is still there, but it's deserted.



I return to the circus site again a year later, still hoping. The vision of the caravans, the tent, and the string of golden lightbulbs shines brightly in my memory. This time, I find the street, but the hole in the city has been filled.

A new apartment building stands now tall and proud, white and antiseptic, a symptom of the contagious ugliness worming through modern Paris. Not even a hint remains of what once briefly graced this lot.



Gypsy jazz too lives in the holes in history. Like a Romani circus, it's as likely to depart silently for destinations unknown as it is to be documented and recorded. This is a music of joy and sadness and fire that burns brilliantly for a brief moment, and then is gone.

While the genre of Gypsy jazz is enduring, the musicians and their music are evanescent. From the beginning, it was a vagabond music. Gypsy jazz was born on the move, whether it was with Django and his contemporaries such as his brother Joseph Reinhardt, the Ferret dynasty, the Malha and Garcia clans, or the Romani musicians of today. And most of the music is lost forever as soon as the last notes fade away.

Similarly, the history of the earliest days of jazz in New Orleans is largely documented only in salacious rumors and aggrandizing tall tales. Storyville maestros such as Charles "Buddy" Bolden and Freddie Keppard—men who truly *made* the music—never recorded. In the realm of Gypsy jazz, too many musicians were never or rarely recorded either: pioneers such as Jean "Poulette" Castro, Mattéo Garcia, and Auguste "Gusti" Malha; Jacques "Montagne" Mailhes, Jacques "Piton" Reinhardt, Eddie "Bamboula" Ferret, Jean "Memette" Ferret, and probably the sole woman among them, Mano Rena. Even musicians like Pierre Joseph "Baro" Ferret, Étienne "Patotte" Bousquet, and Paul "Tchan Tchou" Vidal, who were all relatively well recorded, left behind just a small trace of their musical abilities considering the grand impact they had on others. And this is music made largely within our lifetimes.

To many who heard this Gypsy jazz as it was first being played, it was merely charming ambience—Gypsy muzak or Romani elevator music. In Pigalle, Montmartre, Montparnasse, and in the *quartiers chaud* of other French cities, Gypsy jazz provided the rhythm to the bump and grind of strippers, softened the rough edges of a squalid nightclub, or at best, was a swinging tune for dancing. In the circuses, music played by Gypsy bands—including Django's—was the dramatic buildup before a trapeze artist swung through the heavens or a clown fell flat on his *derrière*. As that ultimate French snob, Jean-Paul Sartre, infamously decried all jazz, it was throw-away music made to be consumed on the spot, like a lowly banana.

In the early years, only a few bothered to take this outsider jazz seriously. In Paris, their names were Pierre Nourry, Hugues Panassié, and especially Charles

Delaunay, three Frenchman—non-Gypsies—who simply loved jazz. It was Delaunay who largely made Django and kept his career and legacy alive, even after the guitarist's death. And it was Delaunay who recorded everyone from Baro Ferret, Jean "Matelo" Ferret, and Tchan Tchou to Django's second son Babik Reinhardt, as well as providing numerous sessions for numerous Romani jazzmen to earn livings as accompanists. Without Delaunay, who can guess how little of this music would have survived.

There was also the curious effect of Django's star power, which eclipsed the brilliance of too many of his own contemporaries. Django won the press accolades and received the recording contracts; his fellow Gypsy jazzmen often played their music in his shadow. And sometimes, they even aped the master, playing not only his compositions but even growing moustaches and fretting their instruments with just two fingers to mimic Django himself. In the end, their legacy was missed by the spotlight as well.

All of this is a roundabout way of stating that this isn't your typical book of music history as this is not your typical music. Gypsy jazz is still very much alive. Its story lives in today's Romani encampments, flea-market bars, backstreet cafés, and jam sessions at religious pilgrimages, from Paris to Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer, on back roads throughout France and Europe, and even hidden in plain sight in the United States. This book is an account of my own travels in search of this music, and as such, it's pure detective story. Yet I am ultimately and rightly just a bit player; the musicians and the music are the heroes.

Thus, my footnotes rarely follow the status quo of historiography. I cite documents and printed works where they're available. But more often I tell firsthand of campfire conversations, card game chatter, and barroom bull sessions, wild one-upmanship jams and gigs at both Pigalle dives and tony concert halls—as well as a couple of switchblade duels, a fortune-telling and its subsequent fleecing (the only bit of the future I can now guess at for certain), numerous culs-de-sac, a couple of discoveries, and too many *noisettes* and too much *pastis* along the road.

As with the history of the pioneers of mainstream jazz, the Gypsy jazzmen's stories may at times be bloated with bombast and braggadocio, or, on the other hand, half-truth cover-ups to protect the not-so-innocent from the long arm of the gendarmes. There's a French Romanès saying, *Si khohaimo may patshivalo sar o tshatshimo*—There are lies more believable than truth. And there's another Romani saying that's a twist on this: A good tale is truer than the truth. Both of these sayings are especially true when told to a *gadjo*, or non-Gypsy, such as

myself. I have done my best to weigh various accounts and separate the legends from the legendary, the lies from the alibis. It's the job of journalists or readers or jazz fans to do their own best to listen closely for the true story or the honest solo.

This may make for imperfect history, but it's all part of the nature—and soul—of Gypsy jazz.

ONE

The Guitar with a Human Voice

In Search of Django Reinhardt

ONE MAN, ONE GUITAR, two fingers, six strings, an infinity of notes. This jazz is joy made song. Alive and iridescent, it swings with effortless intensity, transcending the everyday world. Yet it's also infused with a bittersweet spirit, nostalgic, melancholic, something nameless and impossible to articulate in anything but music. Within the melodies and strophes of improvisations resound an emblem of a people. An emblem, and a mystery. Here is the legend of the Romani in music, leading back a millennium, stretching across continents. These melodies are fully modern, yet ancient and ageless.

I don't remember when I first heard of Django Reinhardt, but it seems as though his name at least was always in my musical consciousness. This is of course not true. But on the other hand, I can't remember when I *didn't* know of him. We each discover a music through different routes, sometimes a direct path, sometimes a wandering road. And that same music speaks to each of us with a meaning fresh and new and unique, yet still universal. Every guitarist or fan of guitar music—whether it's country or rock'n'roll, bluegrass or jazz—comes across Django at some early point, often in company with his violinist foil, Stéphane Grappelli. We all may not be able to whistle one of Django's melodies, but we know of him as the Gypsy guitarist of jazz. Django was the Big Bang in the universe of the guitar, one of the pioneers of the guitar as a solo instrument. His story is a musical fairy tale, and who wouldn't be entranced?

Oddly enough, it was the influence of B. B. King that pushed me finally to seek out Django's music. Without question, B. B. seems an unlikely ambassador.

Here was a sharecropper from the Mississippi Delta turned Memphis bluesman, and he was sharing with the world his own fascination for a French-born Gypsy.

B. B. was still Riley King when he first made his own discovery. Even though a handful of Django's recordings were available in the United States on licensed discs, the Quintette du Hot Club de France hadn't hit it big in rural Mississippi. A friend from B. B.'s hometown of Indianola, a fellow music fan and guitar player named Willie Dotson, had been drafted into the U. S. Army during World War II. On leave in liberated Paris, Dotson heard Django play and was fired by his find. As B. B. recounted in his autobiography, "My friend bought some records—those big ol' easy-to-break 78 rpm shellacs—wrapped them up in tissue paper and cloth like they were precious jewels (which they were), and presented them to me when he came home to Mississippi. I couldn't believe what I heard."

What B. B. King heard deserves to be recounted in its entirety. He describes listening to Django's jazz as a musical epiphany. It made clear to him aspects of music theory that had been like foreign words—aspects such as Django's deep appreciation of harmony, a unique and personal sense of phrasing, and a fluency of scales that B. B. now strived to learn from a musical illiterate. And there were technical innovations, things like bent and smeared notes, the full use of the complete twelve-note scale, and a free interchange of modes of the scale, shotgun marriages of the apparently disparate Mixolydian to Phrygian modes that resulted in harmony. Yet beyond all the technicalities, it was the spirit that moved him most. As B. B. remembered with enthusiasm:

> Django was a new world. Him and Grappelli swung like demons. The syncopation got me going, but the beat was just the beginning. It was Django's ideas that lit up my brain. He was light and free and fast as the fastest trumpet, slick as the slickest clarinet, running through chord changes with the skill of a sprinter and the imagination of a poet. He was nimble like a cat. Songs like "Nuages" and "Nocturne" took me far away from my little place in Indianola, transporting me over the ocean to Paris, where people sipped wine in outdoor cafes and soaked in the most romantic jazz the world has ever known. I loved Django because of the joy in his music, the light-hearted feeling and freedom to do whatever he felt. Even if I hadn't been told he was a Gypsy, I might have guessed it. There's wanderlust in Django's guitar, a you-can't-fence-me-in attitude that inspired me. It didn't matter that he was technically a million times better than me. His music fortified an idea I held close to my heart—that the guitar is a voice unlike any other. The guitar is a miracle. Out of the strings and the frets comes this personality—whether a blind black man from Texas or a Gypsy from Belgium—of a unique human being.

When I ran across B. B.'s epistle on Django, I was in turn besotted by Mississippi Delta blues, working to decipher the playing of old-time maestros like Son House and capture at least a faint echo of their intensity with a bottleneck slide on my own suitably battered National Duolian steel-bodied guitar. B. B. King was about as far from Son House or Robert Johnson as the blues could get; while he was raised on the same down-and-dirty juke joint blues, he took the music uptown, at least as far as Beale Street in Memphis, and injected it with a newfound elegance. Yet as B. B. was never too proud to tell the world, much of that beauty he added to the blues was inspired by a French Gypsy's guitar.

It was the late 1980s when B. B. opened my eyes again to Django, but opening my ears to him was to prove more difficult. In those days, simply finding Django's music was a trial of its own. Compact discs had arrived in 1983 in the United States but reissues of classic music lagged behind, and it would still be a decade before I bowed to buying my first CD. LPs by Django were hard to come by: Few labels were bothering to reissue his music on vinyl any more. And collectors fought over his LPs at premium prices in rare record stores—when, that is, another collector was foolish enough to sell off an old Django Reinhardt album in the first place. Many of the vinyl reissues of Django's music were less than perfect. Some producers had notoriously speeded up the already quick-paced music until the band sounded frenetic and the keys shifted tonalities. On other records, song titles were confused. It was tough to find what you wanted, hard to know what you were getting, and difficult to determine if what you got was the real deal.

And so the first time I heard Django play was the old-fashioned way—via an original 78 rpm recording. I remember setting the needle down on a tired platter and then waiting in anticipation. The label stated that this was Django and Stéphane's version of "Limehouse Blues." Recorded on September 30, 1935, Django's Quintette du Hot Club de France included Stéphane's violin backed by bassist Louis Vola and a rhythm guitar section comprising Django's best friend, fellow Gypsy Pierre "Baro" Ferret, and Django's younger brother, Joseph, better known by the affectionate Romani diminutive nickname of Nin-Nin. The tune was a novelty number, although in just over a decade since its composition in 1922 by English songwriter Philip Braham, it had already become a jazz standard. The fast-paced foxtrot evoked London's notorious Limehouse Chinatown in its mock Oriental melody. The song emerged through an opium-hazed ambience, Hollywood stereotypes of mysterious Chinamen and sultry dragon ladies; as the lyrics bemoaned, "Rings on your fingers and tears for your crown, that is the story of old Chinatown." This tidbit of chinoiserie had been a hit for American bandleader Paul Whiteman and His Orchestra, rising to number four on the pop charts. And so now here was a French Gypsy with his guitar

imitating American hornmen playing faux Chinese jazz. It was all musical chop suey.

But it wasn't the ethnomusicology that grabbed me. It was simply the music.

As the needle rode the grooves, the Quintette struck up the theme. The *boom-chick boom-chick* of the beat was pounded out by three acoustic guitars, the violin soaring angelically above, the heartbeat of the string bass below. Then Django's guitar impatiently cuts through the theme into a first solo chorus. And the music blossoms. He takes the lead as the rhythm guitars fall back into the famous stride of *la pompe*—that rock-steady Gypsy jazz rhythm known descriptively as "the pump." Django's guitar is sublime and pure, dashing through cascades of elegant arpeggios, playing at once with style and sheer aleatoric abandon. Never before at that time had so much guitar been played by one man for so many. Even now, half a century later and on the other side of the globe, my wife sways to the music as we cook dinner. My teenaged son, the budding punk guitarist, whistles along with the melody. And I never want the song to end. The sheer exuberance of the band often pushes the sonic limits of the era's single-mic monaural recording technology. Django's sound carries echoes of his Romani background in its virtuosity. But there's also something else, something foreign: He has drunk in jazz—a music from another, far-off world—assimilated it wholly, and is now giving it back, glistening with a new, unique brilliance.

As many people during the day swore, Django's guitar speaks with a human voice.

When Django was at his zenith in the 1930s and 1940s, no one termed the music he played "Gypsy jazz." It was simply jazz, played by a Gypsy with a guitar. He learned the music primarily from recordings and only later by playing with many of the early greats—Louis Armstrong, Coleman Hawkins, Duke Ellington, Eddie South. And with the music from those foreign 78s still reverberating in his ears, he was trying to sound as American as he possibly could. Combining his influences, his pioneering use of the guitar, and his individual sensibility, Django created a music of his own. There are few others who single-handedly gave birth to a whole musical genre. And it's a genre that is today continually *re*created.

Django's first instrument was the violin. He learned the instrument from his father, fingering classic Hungarian, Romanian, and Russian Tziganes tunes, songs like the campfire lament "Les yeux noirs" with its dark, minor-key melody, likely played in a waltz's three-four time as they did in those days. He also learned popular songs of the era, barrel-organ turns, simple one-step dance tunes,

and light-opera overtures—anything people at small-town markets, country fairs, or city flea markets might pay to hear.

By the time Django was twelve, he was a professional musician. He was now playing a *banjo-guitare*, a bizarre bastard of a diminutive banjo resonator mated with a dwarf six-string guitar neck. Hired by another Gypsy, Italian Zingaro accordionist Vétese Guérino, their band performed in the underworld dance halls in the backstreets of Paris. The music they played was known as musette, a music as distinctly Parisian as the tango was native to Buenos Aires and jazz, at least at the start, was indigenous to New Orleans. Musette was good-times music, unreeled for factory workers and shopgirls in the Eldorado of the weekend nights, the low-class ballrooms known as *bals musette*. This was the pop music of the day, most of it composed in cheerful major keys and timed in dancing tempos. Alongside the waltzes, other music was also adopted, but only if it was danceable: tangos, mazurkas, paso dobles, early cakewalks, and a quick-paced romp known as *la java*.

During the years Django performed in the *bals*, he came upon another new music—American jazz, played across town in the fancy *boîtes du nuit* of Pigalle, Montparnasse, and along Les Champs-Élysées. This early jazz was not particularly jazzy, but it was wild and raucous and free, all enlivened by a heartbeat of drums. To Django, it was an awakening.

By the dawn of the 1930s, he was playing his own interpretations of Louis Armstrong's cornet solos on his guitar. On Django's first jazz recording—an August 1934 audition acetate cut at Paris's amateur Publicis Studios—he and his brother Nin-Nin jammed on the Dixieland classic that Dippermouth made famous, "Tiger Rag." Django's guitar playing was alive with dizzying melodic improvisations. Here was a young Romani man—just twenty-four at the time—who had barely been able to scrape together the money to buy a guitar, performing a music of a different culture from another world, and playing it in his own campfire style, reborn, recreated, renewed. And so Gypsy jazz was born a wanderer's music, blending influences from a Romani violin and a flamenco guitar, the Parisian underworld's accordion, and Louis Armstrong's horn.

From the beginning, Gypsy jazz was a pariah's music. Just as the blues and jazz gave voice to African Americans, this bastardized string jazz allowed another dispossessed people to speak. When Django picked his guitar, his fellow Romani listened. And over the years, his music became a symbol of Gypsy identity.

Django's jazz was a pariah music even within the world of jazz, simply for the instrument on which he performed. Jazz to most musicians and aficionados alike was horn music, piano music. In the 1930s, guitars were rhythm instruments, part of the percussion section plonking out a four-to-the-floor beat; guitars were

better suited for parlor-song sing-alongs than for improvising jazz solos. Even finding a guitar suitable for playing jazz was nearly impossible—an instrument loud enough to be heard through the sound and fury of the horns and yet lucid and sonorous in tone. There were certainly others playing jazz on guitar at the time—in particular, Lonnie Johnson and Eddie Lang. But no one took the guitar as far as Django. Thus, he was not only pioneering the music but also pioneering the use of the guitar as a solo instrument. In the Parisian galaxy of artistes and philosophes, of impressionists, Dadaists, surrealists, cubists, existentialists, Django created a completely new being—a guitarist.

While most of Django's sidemen in his Quintette du Hot Club de France were Romani cousins, his soloist foils were all *gadjé*—non-Gypsies. First and foremost, there was the dapper and sophisticated Parisian Stéphane Grappelli, whom Django chose as his duet partner because he played jazz on the Romani's signature instrument, the violin. Then, in Django's Nouveau Quintette during the World War II years, came clarinetists Hubert Rostaing and Gérard Lévêque, doubling during the hot days of swing as Gaul's answer to Benny Goodman. Finally, fired by bebop, Django played alongside saxmen André Ekyan and Hubert Fol, standing in as French Charlie Parkers.

Even in the early years before Gypsy jazz bore its name, Django was not the sole Gypsy guitarist playing jazz. There were the famous *frères* Ferret—Baro, Étienne "Sarane," Jean "Matelo," and their cousin and honorary "fourth brother" Charles-Alain "Challain." The Ferret brothers all accompanied Django in his Quintette at various times, led their own jazz groups, and recorded stunning music in their own images. Django's brother, Nin-Nin, was in demand in Parisian jazz bands, waxing stellar sides with several ensembles. Django was but the brightest star in the heavens of Jazz Age Paris, his brilliance outshining the others in his orbit.

Matelo Ferret once proclaimed that this jazz genre should rightfully be called simply "Django's music," as Django was so instrumental in its creation. Yet Matelo also believed—as he often told his follower, guitarist Francis-Alfred Moerman—that Gypsy jazz would have been born even if Django had never played a note; the elements were all there and waiting, and the other Gypsy jazz guitarists of the 1930s were all similarly inspired. If it hadn't been Django, there was Baro, Sarane, Nin-Nin, Matelo himself.

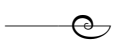
And yet, the music would never have been the same without Django. Gypsy jazz is largely the legacy of one man.

This music was not christened "Gypsy jazz" until some two decades after Django's death in 1953. In attempting in the 1970s to describe the music's uniqueness, its history and its heritage, Francis-Alfred Moerman first termed it *jazz tsigane*—French for "Gypsy jazz." In later years in France, it also won the

misnomers *jazz manouche* (as Django was a Manouche, although many of the other players were Gitan Gypsies) and *jazz gitan* (which, in turn, leaves out its creator). In English, its broad moniker of Gypsy jazz conveniently leaves behind any clan identity.

Today, Gypsy jazz is more popular than ever—among Gypsies and *gadjé* alike. European Romani teach their children to play as soon as they can grip guitars. It's not uncommon at the annual Gypsy pilgrimage to Les Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer in France's Camargue or the tribute concerts to Django at Samois-sur-Seine to see teenaged Gypsy boys picking their guitars in blurs of virtuosity. Among Romani in the United States, Django's music also inspires generations of guitarists proud of their heritage, from John Adomono to Johnny Guitar to Danny Fender and a new era of young American Gypsies. Django has become a hero for a people with few heroes.

In recent decades, Gypsy jazz has again found fans beyond encampments of Romani caravans. People of all nations listen and hear that human voice within Django's guitar. Here is music with real emotion in a modern age when so much electronic pop music wears a false heart on its sleeve. While today's priapic hits are often not even played on true instruments, in Gypsy jazz the soul of the music can be heard in the wood of the guitars and steel voice of the strings. This is music honest and *real*. Musicians adopt and adapt Django's melodies, copping his licks off CDs just as he himself first learned jazz from Louis Armstrong's 78s. There are now Hot Club bands formed in Django's image in most major cities around the globe, from Parisian cafés to American and Japanese nightclubs to international festivals. Gypsy jazz remains a music born of many roots and a rootlessness. It is music personal to one culture and yet universal to all.



When I heard Django's music, I had to play it, to feel the guitar strings and the notes and the melodies under my own fingers, to make that music myself. Unfortunately, I was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Minneapolis, Minnesota, in the early 1990s was not the epicenter of Gypsy jazz. In fact, at the time Gypsy jazz itself was a little-known commodity anywhere beyond the confines of French Romani encampments. Transcriptions of Django's compositions, let alone insight into his technique, did not exist. And I didn't know anyone playing the music from whom I could crib lessons. So I struck out on my own.

Armed with my elderly blues guitar—a World War II–era Gibson Southerner Jumbo—and a Fender Model 351 medium-weight pick, I sat down next to my turntable and lowered the needle onto a 1937 recording of Django and Stéphane playing "Minor Swing." In the pantheon of Django's tunes, it's a relatively easy song head. Yet when I first attempted to decipher the notes and

where and how he played them, it could have been written in Sanskrit. Whistling the melody over and over in my head to lock in on the notes, the music at least transformed itself into French, which I could begin to understand from my elementary school lessons.

Little did I know, however, but I had one of the American LP reissues of Django's greatest hits speeded up to increase the impression of guitar wizardry. The band played "Minor Swing" at a pace few mortals could attain—and especially not this mortal. After hours of playing and re-playing those first two bars, I finally could pick out the melody and translate the simple three-chord structure of the song itself. I've since heard that song played by Django and his Quintette hundreds of times and covered by other bands thousands of times, but I still remember the simple happiness I found in first playing it myself. Of course, due to the speeded-up recording, I had it all wrong. Still, here I was, playing Django with an American guitar using blues barre chords and a regimented down-up picking style all with a rock'n'roll touch. Yet recreating the music with my own fingers was a key to unlocking a first door into Django's world.

Then, on another day, I listen again to Django's original recording, and realize there is an element absent in my playing. Django's jazz has something I can't touch, something I can't even put my finger on. American jazz boasts otherworldly players like Satchmo, rhapsodic ones like Lester Young, and demonic, sold-my-soul musicians like Charlie Parker. Yet their music has at heart a happiness, or at least a faith in the pursuit of happiness. Even when Coleman Hawkins sings a sad song through his sax, his blues is a stoic stance. American blues and jazz exorcised its demons.

Django played jazz as joyful as any. Yet underlying his music, there's an inconsolable Romani sadness in its heart. I can almost hear the voices of all the Gypsies of all the years: those conscripted from their homes in India a century ago to fight the Moslem horde, those left to wander the Gypsy diaspora along the Romani Trail over a millennium, those enslaved in the Balkans by the original Dracula, those exterminated by the SS during *O Porrajmos*—the Great Devouring, as the Romani term their own, near-forgotten Holocaust—and those still today living in hiding on the edges of society, ever-present pariahs. Django could play with virtuosity and make it soulful, jump a swing tune to a racing tempo and fill it with emotion. Listen to his "Swing 42." He composed the song during World War II even while the Nazis were rounding up and exterminating his fellow Romani; the melody came to him one night after dinner as he was playfully scat-singing in his best Dippermouth impression. The song as Django recorded it with his Nouveau Quintette du Hot Club de France in September 1941 may just be the happiest, most transcendent tune ever. But when I play it

slow on my guitar, the melody line is transformed like a miracle of legerdemain. The music reveals a secret soul, and I hear all the beautiful sadness deep within.

How did a twelve-year-old Gypsy waif from the slums of Paris, who had to hustle and steal to get his first instrument, inspire the world with the possibilities of the guitar? How did this outsider create the soundtrack to the city of Paris? Why do today's European Gypsies still find meaning in this music almost a century old and teach it to their children when they are first capable of grasping an instrument? Who are these master musicians behind this music, from Django's day to the current worldwide renaissance? And how did Gypsy jazz become *the* cultural emblem—even a religious rite—for a whole people?

There is something enigmatic, something ineffable within this apparently simple and joyful jazz. And so I decide there is nothing else to do but pack up my guitar and set off to Paris in search of clues to the mystery.

TWO

The Boy with the Banjo

Into a Zigzag Paradise

GYPSY JAZZ WAS BORN in the flea markets of Paris, and it's here that much of the history is found today. Arriving in Paris, I skirt La Tour Eiffel and L'Arc de Triomphe, skip Notre-Dame-de-Paris and the Louvre, and make my way straight for *le marché aux puces*—the market of the fleas—at the Porte de Clignancourt in grimey Saint-Ouen. This is my first destination in seeking traces of the music's history. Here, Django lived much of his life in a caravan, from his childhood on, even during the years when his star ascended. Here, he played his violin and *banjo-guitare*, whether it was around a campfire, in the lost dance halls of the back alleys, or on the streets and café *terrasses* for tossed coins. And here, in 1928 when he was just eighteen, his caravan burned, leaving him near dead. His left, fretting hand was almost destroyed by the flames, forcing him to recreate how he played guitar and setting the stage for his rebirth from the ashes as the world's most famous jazz guitarist.

Coming up out of the darkness of the Porte de Clignancourt *métro* station, this other side of Paris opens before me. At first, I'm blinded by the light. Then the cacophony of sights and rainbow of noises takes shape and form. All around me is the glorious anarchy of *les puces*. This is no longer Paris, no longer even France: It's at once a Moroccan souk, an Arab casbah, a Gambian bazaar, an Eastern European thieves' market, a Gypsy horsetrading fair. And more. The center of Paris is today gentrified and stylish—*bon chic, bon genre*, as the French say—but it's at the expense of the suburbs outside Le Périph, the city's encircling ring road. This is where Paris becomes a Third World realm.

Once upon a time, in Django's day, it was all different, and yet all still the same. The roots of *le marché aux puces de Saint-Ouen* date back to the mid 1800s and the era of Napoléon III, although the wares for sale were, then as now, timeless and ageless. The market blossomed out of the mud each weekend and was named in honor of the fleas that inhabited the upholstery of the old furniture and clothing for sale. There were scores of ragpickers and junksellers—Les Ministres à la Mort, as they were known: the Ministers of the Dead—with wagonloads of bric-à-brac, farmers with fruits and vegetables still breathing the scent of the earth, Gypsies with dancing bears pirouetting to tambourines, costumed monkeys demanding coins for organ grinders, belches of flames from fire-eaters, and the song of a street singer such as that quintessential *parigote*, Edith Piaf, who got her start here as well.

Somehow, little has changed. I smell the wondrous scent of Middle Eastern gyros cooking on spits amid the shill of Africans selling black statues of their gods for mere *centimes*; Romani fortune-tellers read palms while boomboxes cry out like muezzins' calls to prayer translated into voluptuous rai and rap. I uncover paintings by lost masters and the thrones of guillotined monarchs. I pass a stall like a religious shrine devoted to Steve McQueen; another stand full of nothing but buttons in all their myriad varieties like stars and galaxies without end. Pickpockets and prostitutes are on the prowl. I'm offered Marlon Brando's leather jacket and Bob Marley's pirated reggae and Michael Jordan's trainers as well as Corsican switchblades, herbs for sexual prowess, and curses for all purposes. Not even Sacré Cœur is visible from here; the Champs Élysées could be on another planet.

This is where the glories of Paris came to a dead end, today as yesterday. Medieval ramparts once girded the city, and in those times, entrance was through a grand *porte* in one of the ancient *octroi*—the customs barriers—guarded by soldiers. Within lived the good citizens of Paris. Without was a vast nether region known with a hint of menace as *La Zone*. Outside the City of Light, this was a city of blight. It was in *La Zone* that Paris's cesspool cleaners dumped their waste each night, and where the human refuse of the city found refuge. This was not the Paris of boulevards, monuments, and cathedrals. Instead, *bidonvilles*—shantytowns—crowded the city's entrances like beggars holding out their hands for offerings. And this was a true Court of Miracles as well, where the robbers and their fences reveled in their wealth, where *les pilons*—the "wooden-legged" beggars—were tranformed back to health under cover of darkness. The inhabitants of *La Zone* were cursed with spite by Parisians as *les zonards*. And many feared the Gypsies as the worst vermin among them.

Django's family lived here on the doorsteps of Paris. The Manouche and Gitans parked their caravans in *La Zone* where they could find streamwater along

the lost second river of Paris, La Bièvre. Django grew up amongst his clan at favored campsites in *La Zone* near their livelihoods in the flea markets. They moved between encampments outside the Porte de Choisy or Porte d'Italie on the southeastern side of the capital neighboring the Kremlin-Bicêtre flea market and the horse-trading market in the Vaugirard galleries. Porte de Montreuil and its never-ending thieves' market was to the east, Porte de Clignancourt to the north.

In Django's day, the unsung poet of this unsung world was Serge, the *nom de plume* of Maurice de Féaudierre. Serge was a *gadjo* who traveled France and Spain with Django's people—the Gypsy circuses and vagabond flamenco fandangos. He celebrated *La Zone* and *les marchés aux puces* in his 1963 remembrance of things past, *La grande histoire des bohémiens*:

> *La Zone* is a zigzag paradise on wheels of lace-curtained Gypsy caravans filled with hidden treasures of gold and silver. . . . In the center is the flea market, downtrodden in the rain, a marketplace selling past wreckage and miseries. . . . Then, brutal and sordid and yet enchanting, bursts forth the plaintive song of *La Zone* where enchantement is alive in the rot: "La valse des puces"—the waltz of the flea markets—offers up its heavy heart. At night, five hundred *roulottes* glow like oriental palaces and the Gypsies gather around immense blazing infernos and dance alongside the flames while the music of several bands rings out. . . . Between the interplay of the shadows and the fires, everything takes on fantastic proportions. . . . It is the camp of a thousand and one surprises. . . . Mustachioed musicians attack a plaintive air with their guitars while a nightingale sings on a nest of brambles. Where are we? . . . Far, far away, on a lost road of another world.

Even today this other world endures. I make may way through the Clignancourt markets to the north where Romani encampments hang on. Near the Stade de France—that modernistic soccer stadium like a behemoth from outer space—a pathetic handful of Gypsy caravans huddle in a triangle of unused land beneath a highway and the shaking embankment of the railroad tracks. Roofs and walls of discarded plywood connect the trailers like expansion rooms; scraps of rugs carpet the mud pathways. A bonfire of burning junk emits a noxious black cloud in the center of this little *ville*, a scrum of Romani standing around it, joking and laughing. A little further on, in Le Bourget, a vast no-man's land has become a nomads' land. This is a giant's step in upward mobility. Modern campers are scattered over the hard-packed dirt field, a satellite dish crowning each rooftop. Around the edges of the lot, rags and junk that even the scavengers don't want litter the ditches that double as latrines. *La Zone* lives on in scars and scabs that refuse to heal.

Back in the heart of *le marché aux puces* there remains a venerable Gypsy bar, La Chope des Puces—the Beer Mug of the Flea Market. I come down rue des